

the warhol: resources & lessons

Artists Past & Present: Jasper Johns

Jasper Johns was born in Atlanta, Georgia in 1930 but he grew up in South Carolina. He moved to New York City after studying at the University of South Carolina. He began his career at age 24 when he created his first of many flag paintings. His rendering of the American flag startled an art world that was still largely preoccupied with abstraction. The work was exhibited in a 1957 group show at the Leo Castelli Gallery. Alfred Barr of the Museum of Modern Art wanted to purchase the work but worried that it might be seen as unpatriotic by his board, so he arranged for someone else to buy it and later donate it to the museum. *Flag's* ambiguity intrigued many and led art critic Robert Rosenblum to ask, "Is it blasphemous or respectful, simple-minded or recondite?"



Jasper Johns has often been seen as the intermediary between two art movements: Abstract Expressionism and Pop Art. However, his long career of painting, sculpting, and collaborative work stretches decades beyond this narrow slice of time in the mid-1950s. Drawing ideas from modern art movements of the 20th century and commercial culture, Johns forged a new path away from abstraction. Like the Pop Artists who followed him, Johns transformed the appearance of easily read objects such as, maps, targets, and numbers. Perhaps most importantly, he altered the way we perceive these symbols and exposed the underlying complexity in everyday iconography. His practice, however, was one of intensive painting, layering recognizable symbols with thick paint, encaustic, beeswax, and other media. Still working today, Jasper Johns remains interested in logic, language, and exploring meaning through altered symbols.

"One night I dreamed I painted a large American flag, and the next morning I got up and I went out and bought the materials to begin it. And I did. I worked on that painting a long time. It's a very rotten painting—physically rotten—because I began it in house enamel paint, which you paint furniture with, and it wouldn't dry quickly enough. Then I had in my head this idea of something I had read or heard about: wax encaustic."

--Jasper Johns

Links:

Jasper Johns' 1996/97 Retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art:
<http://www.moma.org/exhibitions/1996/johns/>

An exhibition catalog for a 1976 Johns' exhibition written by the popular author, Michael Crichton:
<http://www.crichton-official.com/johns/>

The San Francisco Museum of Modern Art 2000 show of Johns' work:
http://www.sfmoma.org/exhibitions/exhib_detail/99_exhib_jasper_johns.html

Research:

Dada, Pop Art, Semiotics, Patriotism

Comprehension Questions:

1. Compare how the first American flag was made to how flags are made today.
2. What materials do you think are best for making flags? Why?
3. Describe Jasper Johns' approach to painting flags; does his representation change the flag's meaning?
4. Do you think Flag is reverent or disrespectful? Explain why.

© 2006 The Andy Warhol Museum, a museum of Carnegie Institute. All rights reserved.

You may view and download the materials posted in this site for personal, informational, educational and non-commercial use only. The contents of this site may not be reproduced in any form beyond its original intent without the permission of The Andy Warhol Museum. except where noted, ownership of all material is The Andy Warhol Museum, Pittsburgh; Founding Collection, Contribution The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, Inc.

the warhol: resources & lessons

Artists Past & Present: Jasper Johns



Jasper Johns

Flag, 1954-55

Encaustic, oil, and collage on fabric mounted on plywood

42 x 61 in.

Museum of Modern Art, gift of Philip Johnson in honor of Alfred H. Barr, Jr.